

KAMEHAMEHA

Deactivating 'leaves an empty spot in my heart' says chief of the boat

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marines, was originally built to serve as a strategic deterrent at the height of the Cold War. The technological superiority and exceptional reliability of these submarines, whose mission was to patrol the oceans unseen to dissuade the Soviet Union from striking the United States under threat of massive retaliation from sea-launched missiles, ultimately contributed to winning the Cold War.

National leadership decided that the submarine could be successfully converted to satisfy other missions for which a larger submarine would be uniquely qualified. In Kamehameha's case, the ship would have its strategic missiles removed and converted to accommodate Special Forces. Since the Cold War, Kamehameha has endeavored to maintain peace through engaging allies and deterring aggression in the same Pacific waters King Kamehameha mastered so long ago.

"The submarine fulfills an excellent mission, and the crew is well-trained and has been able to execute when directed by the National Command Authority. Despite her age, this ship is able to go anywhere in the world and conduct any mission with which it is tasked," said Cmdr. Ed Seal, Kamehameha's commanding officer.

Contrary to popular belief, the end of the Cold War brought an increase to submarine tasking despite the decrease in available assets. Responsibilities increasingly shifted to data collection, Tomahawk strike warfare contingencies, intelligence, surveillance, indications and warning, counter-drug operations and engagement with allies. The unlimited range, mobility, stealth and firepower of submarines have become a stalwart in the nation's defense inventory. The conversion of Kamehameha was in retrospect a prophetic decision.

The first two commanding officers of the "Kam", as the submarine is affectionately known around the waterfront, were Cmdr. Roth S. Leddick (Blue crew) and then Cmdr. Robert Dickieson (Gold crew).

"I was certainly excited to be a part of the commissioning crew," said now retired Navy Capt. Dickieson, who lives in Kaneohe, Hawaii. "I was primarily a fast-attack boat Sailor so I had to learn a great deal to come up to speed."

Kamehameha's current senior enlisted man, or "chief of the boat," CDMC David "Chuck" Minnich has served aboard the Kamehameha for more than three years.

"I think our namesake really carried through in every aspect of our tour and life here. Much like the original Kamehameha, we too can say that we allowed children to live safely. The guys are really proud to go downtown into Honolulu and say 'I'm from the Kamehameha.' It always generates interest with the people they're talking to," said Minnich.

"We were proud to represent the King," said Dickieson. "Our first crew was loaded with a bunch of great guys and we still keep in touch today."

USS Kamehameha was sponsored by Mrs. Samuel Wilder King at the launching. Her husband was one of the first Hawaiians to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy, was governor of the territory of Hawaii, and strived for Hawaiian statehood.

Following commissioning, Kamehameha joined Submarine Squadron 15, located in Guam, and while there was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation for operations. The ship was transferred to the Atlantic Fleet in July 1970 and joined Submarine Squadron 18 in Charleston, S.C. The following year, USS Kamehameha was transferred to Groton,

Conn. for weapons conversion and a refueling overhaul.

Upon completion in October 1972, USS Kamehameha conducted operations off the east coast of the United States. She joined Submarine Squadron 16 in June 1973 and made patrols out of Rota, Spain. Six years later, in July 1979, USS Kamehameha rejoined Submarine Squadron 18 and made several more patrols from there. The ship was awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation for operations in 1984 and 1985 as a member of Submarine Squadron 14. During that time she was selected as the Atlantic Fleet Ballistic Missile Submarine Top Performer.

USS Kamehameha underwent a refueling overhaul at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard from November 1986 to December 1989 and its conversion to a special purpose attack submarine in July 1992. Kamehameha finally arrived in Pearl Harbor in August 1993 to become part of Submarine Squadron One.

For the last several years, Kamehameha has been actively engaged throughout the Pacific fulfilling all forms of exercises and operations with allies. The ship was a regular participant in exercise Foal Eagle, a major annual exercise in which the armed forces of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States practice the combined defense of South Korea.

"Foal Eagle has historically provided significant benefit to the U.S. and the ROK in terms of practicing combined war fighting skills," said Lt. Chap Godbey, the ship's navigator. "It has also provided a wealth of engagement and access opportunities, and it has resulted in long-term improvement in the interoperability of the forces of both nations. Ultimately, this ship has done a great deal to maintain peace through strength and engaging with our allies in the Pacific," he added.

Kamehameha has carried as many as 200 troops for a short time and did so without reducing its load of torpedoes, the ship's primary offensive and defensive weapon. The conversion of the submarine showcased the inherent flexibility offered by the larger platform.

"Kamehameha very much demonstrates the ability to take a submarine and convert it from one mission (strategic deterrence) to another (special warfare). After more than 25 years of satisfying deterrence, the submarine has performed outstandingly in a whole new role," Seal said.

The submarine deployed for a six-month deployment to the Western Pacific in 2000, and deployed on another four-month deployment from which it just returned in June 2001. Throughout, the crew worked closely with U.S. and allied Special Forces in pushing the envelope in covert deployment of teams.

"It's hard to believe it's been 36 years since we commissioned the boat," said Dickieson. "The Kam was definitely my best tour."

King Kamehameha grew up to be a great leader as early priests had foretold. When he passed on May 8, 1819 in Kailua-Kona on the island of Hawaii, his bones were hidden to protect their power. To this day, no one knows where he rests.

USS Kamehameha will journey next to Bremerton, Wash. to be formally decommissioned. The ship will be de-fueled and the hull will be cut up and recycled.

"Decommissioning the ship and transferring off leaves an empty spot in my heart. I appreciate the work of the crew and their dedication to keep it operating. I think the accomplishments of the crew and submarine created a legacy and demonstrate the spirit of what the American people do every day," said Minnich.



USS Kamehameha photo

USS Kamehameha's (SSBN 642) pre-commissioning crew in 1965.



JOCS(SW/AW) Darrell D. Ames photo

Kawila Clark, a Hawaiian kahu (guardian or minister), performs a ceremonial cleansing with the healing waters of the ocean during USS Kamehameha's inactivation ceremony Wednesday.



JOCS(SW/AW) Darrell D. Ames photo

Hawaii Senator and World War II veteran Daniel Inouye arrives aboard USS Kamehameha.

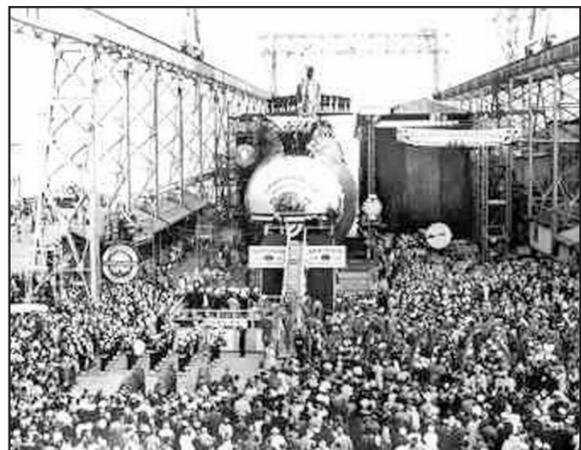


JOCS(SW/AW) Darrell D. Ames photo

Lt. Chap Godbey (right) looks on as the commissioning pennant is ceremoniously hauled down aboard USS Kamehameha during the inactivation ceremony Wednesday.



USS Kamehameha photo



USS Kamehameha photo

Above and left: USS Kamehameha (SSBN 642) in Mare Island Naval Shipyard, Vallejo, Calif.